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Book Review:

On Stalled Revolutions and Revived Authoritarianism in the Arab World

Alessandro Tinti*

Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising by Gilbert Achcar, 2016, Stanford University Press.

Hannah Arendt opened her reflection on revolutions pointing out that these “are the only political events that confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning” (Arendt, 1990 p. 21). In a sense, Gilbert Achcar’s *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* stems from the same root, being aimed at explaining why the unprecedented wave of popular upheavals erupted in the Arab world at the turn of 2011 – grouped together under the attractive heading of ‘Arab Spring’ – has not blossomed into the political metamorphosis of the whole region, whereas the revolutionary aspirations for change have given way under a dire competition between the reactionary forces of counter-revolution. In other words, Achcar assesses how the social question brought to the fore by massive popular demonstrations – which shattered the foundations of Arab societies in the aftermath of the Tunisian ‘Jasmine’ Revolution – has been hijacked and suppressed by resurgent regimes and rising fundamentalist movements.

In the opening chapter, Achcar argues that the reasons why the hopes for freedom of the Arab Spring have been turning into a bleak Arab Winter are summarized in a well-known passage from Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*: “[the] crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci, 1930, §34, p. 311). At a time when the crisis of authority of the ruling class exposed a critical rupture between popular masses and dominant ideologies, Gramsci stressed the morbid stalemate that follows the slow decline of the old establishment – devoid of consensus but still in control of power. Applied to the contemporary Arab world, this notion of crisis suggests that whilst old autocracies are being eroded by crony capitalism and growing inequality, a new political order cannot be born due to peculiar regional traits: i) the explosive mixture of patrimonial states and rentier economies, ii) the consolidation of Islamic fundamentalism as the dominant counter-hegemonic ideology, nurtured by like-minded regional powers to prevent any emancipatory instance to rise, iii) the enduring projection of international powers that have a stake in securing the status quo, and iv) the lack of well-organized and independent progressive leaderships to drive social protest. In such an interregnum, Gramsci’s ‘morbid symptoms’ takes on the appearance of a binary confrontation between two rival counter-revolutionary camps, the regional ancien régimes on one side and radical Islamist groups on the other side, though united against the revolutionary spirit of the uprisings. In this respect, Achcar’s book follows his previous work *The People Want* (2013), which focused on the structural emergence of the revolutionary tide sweeping Middle Eastern and North African societies, exploring how the al-Qusayr offensive launched by the Syrian regime and its allies in April 2013 and the 3 July military coup in Egypt “ushered in a region-wide counter-revolutionary phase involving a chain reaction in the countries that experienced the mass uprisings of 2011” (p. 151).

Two core chapters review such a reversal in Syria and Egypt, two fundamental axes of the Arab insurgency, through the accurate and brilliant use of primary and secondary sources. In the former scenario, Achcar argues that ‘two fatal dynamics’ led the country to ‘plunge into barbarism’ (pp. 15-16): the military imbalance in favour of Damascus, ensured by the large deployment of Russian and Iranian capabilities in the Syrian theatre, and the amount of money flowing from the Persian

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Gulf (namely, from Saudi Arabia and Qatar) to fundamentalist Sunni armed militias. Both factors weakened and marginalized the heterogeneous network of opposition groups, mainly gathered under the umbrella of the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, which had sparked the revolt against the rule of Bashar al-Assad.

Achcar points out that US inaction bears responsibility for the dramatic escalation of conflict and the 'abandonment of the Syrian people' by denying the opposition the military support it needed in order to fight back to the bloody repression of initially peaceful protests, in particular the anti-aircraft weapons that would have been a game changer on the battlefield given the government's full control of air power. As shown by the juxtaposition of statements from Obama administration's top officials, the rationale behind the US unwillingness to intervene in the crisis was "securing an 'orderly transition' and avoiding the repetition of the Iraqi debacle by preserving the bulk of the Syrian state apparatus" (p.24). However, American inaction turned out to make a political transition unattainable. Whereas Washington let Gulf oil monarchies ('the region's most reactionary linchpin') financing and empowering Sunni extremism, thus mutating the civil conflict into a Saudi-Iranian sectarian proxy war, the US empty reaction to the use of chemical weapons by Syrian government forces (Obama's 'red line' for a military engagement) in August 2013 exacerbated Assad's heavy reliance on indiscriminate attacks thereafter and paved the way to the crucial Russian intervention on the side of Damascus. The US policy for Syria, therefore, fell short of the "Yemeni solution" envisaged by Obama, that is to say maintaining Baathist state institutions while forcing the President to step down, since Assad "did not feel threatened and compelled to seek a compromise" (p.52).

Achcar devotes much effort to detailing the careless and misguided US position as a determining factor in driving Syria towards the edge of a 'dreadful dialectic' between a regime in decay on one hand and jihadist Salafism on the other hand, with no prospects for a democratic transition whatsoever. In this regard, the author stresses how Assad himself fostered sectarianism in order to delegitimize the whole range of oppositions as terrorist organizations, by first releasing from jail hundreds of jihadists who militarily took over the insurgency and then allowing the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and its Syrian offshoot Jabhat al-Nusra to take roots in the country. In this perspective, jihadism early became "Assad regime's preferred enemy" (p. 41) to repulse the ungovernable challenge of democratization.

Likewise, the trajectory of events in Egypt shows the violent containment of the revolutionary wave that overthrew Mubarak's three-decade rule through the collaboration and soon after the conflict between two conservative wings: the Muslim Brotherhood, which stepped out from the January 25 Revolution as the main political actor, and the military, which represented the line of continuity with the old regime.

With the popular imprimatur of the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections but without holding the 'sovereign ministries' that actually handle the levers of power, Muslim Brothers attempted to fill the vacuum at the expense of both liberal-leftist oppositions and the wealthy military-security apparatus. When Mohamed Morsi – Egypt's first democratically elected president – started asserting the Brotherhood impetuous quest for power, growing tensions therefore offered the Army the possibility of fully restoring the regime. The military succeeded again in hijacking the revolution by taking the lead of the Tamarrod anti-Morsi campaign, which put together the full range of political parties opposed to the 'brotherhoodisation' of Egyptian institutions, as well as labour and youth movements. As a result, what Achcar describes as the "most massive involvement of people in a methodical action in pursuit of a single practical political objective in Egypt's history" (p. 88) paradoxically laid the foundations of a second counter-revolutionary phase, initiated by the 3rd July reactionary coup and embodied in 'the ruthless rise' of Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi.

Achcar provides an excellent overview of Egypt's brutal and rapid descending into a state of terror, drawing attention to how the draconian measures of Sisi's presidency buried the path to democracy under thousands of arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, and death sentences. Furthermore, it is emphasized that the authoritarian turn underway fulfils the prophecy of increasing terrorism, fostering the radicalization of members and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the background, the steady socio-economic deterioration exposed by persistent labour strikes is "a further indication of the fact that the Egyptian revolutionary process that had begun in January 2011 [is] far from over" (p.148).

Achcar's discussion touches upon the debate on the endurance of authoritarianism in the Arab world. In so doing, he rejects theories of 'Arab exceptionalism' resonating in much of the mainstream Western literature that presume to explain the democratic deficit by virtue of orientalist arguments. His position is rather clear from the outset: the Arab uprising 'is not – or not only or even primarily – a democratic transition', but 'a thorough social revolution' that seeks to overturn 'a whole socioeconomic order after a protracted state of developmental blockage' (cf. 5-6). The revolutionary process is therefore understood as historical necessity, yet thwarted by the entrenchment of coercive apparatuses and the contagion of Islamic fundamentalism. Embracing a materialist conception of history and progress, the relapse in the Arab uprising stands as a contingent phase of a long-term revolutionary cycle to be completed. Although the comparison between Syrian and Egyptian events highlights the capacity of security apparatuses, Achcar looks at economic structure and class dynamics as the proper ground where the "irruption of the 'people's will' onto the scene" (p.172) has been betrayed at every turn. Indeed, he specifies, both wings of counter-revolution are aligned to a neoliberal economic perspective that is not conducive to a new era of emancipation. Hence, the scepticism regarding the Tunisian model, whereby the political compromise underpinning the only successful transition since the wave of protests began in 2011 appears to be largely disconnected from the social struggle that raised the turmoil in the Arab world. Then, the rise of the terrorism is no more than the 'fringe expression' of frustrated or unsatisfied expectations (p. 165).

It could be said that such argumentation fails to grasp why the same set of fault lines and social grievances did not erupt in mobilizations of the same intensity in every Arab country. If Syria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia are variations of a revolutionary pattern denoting an Arab upheaval, should we consider the many 'null cases' where the outbursts of protest were moderate (Algeria, Lebanon) or have been dampened by cosmetic moves of the establishment (Morocco, Jordan) as examples of a 'silent spring' (cf. Bellin, 2013, p. 143)? This point does not question Achcar's assessment, but it invites to problematize the notion of Arab uprising, which overly stretches the Arab Spring model and its pathos of novelty to the whole region.

Although the idea of an irreversible, unitary, and open-ended revolution – which reminds Proudhon's (1848) 'permanent revolution' – involves a certain degree of determinism, the conceptualization of a dysfunctional reactionary order unable to respond to social change is compelling and has the greatest merit of going beyond the democracy-autocracy antithesis to understand the transition unfolding in Arab societies. Indeed, the narrative of a 'three-cornered struggle' between a revolutionary pole and two counter-revolutionary contenders ties together quite effectively the many contexts of the Arab Spring(s), without any loss in complexity. Furthermore, Achcar engages in a reflection on the Arab Left, caught in-between organizational weaknesses and the misplaced support of 'unlikely bedfellows', which is often overlooked in the literature and the broader debate. Then, the baseline Marxist structural explanation constantly relates to and is balanced by a sharp discussion on political agency.

In conclusion, *Morbid Symptoms* is a masterfully written and challenging analysis of paramount importance to put the upheaval crossing the Arab region into historical perspective. Moreover, Achcar's far-reaching assessment encourages critical thinking and provides a powerful interpretative key for understanding the nonlinear revolutionary cycle that the 2011 transnational wave of protest set in motion.

References

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